

A Life in Poems

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1946-1955

This was a period of extreme change- from pre-adolescent to university scholar. I first travelled abroad in 1947 and in 1951 went on my own to the Festival of Britain in London and then on to Paris for a month. The effect was dramatic. The first introduced me to visual lightness and charm, as well as many fascinating ideas such as Dr. Grey Walter's robot mice. The second was a complete contrast to my life in middle England, at a time when I was becoming sexually aware.

Switching in mid-stream from frivolity to seriousness is a characteristic of my poetry that has remained ever since. As of 1949 onwards the poems come from the actual year indicated- as far as I can judge from my writing, the typewriter used, and the scraps of paper from specific sources such as school notebooks.

1946

Dancing

I would like to dance with Meg
But Meg has gone to dance with Jim
And Jim would like to dance with Ted
Who knows he cannot dance with him
So asks Eileen to dance instead
But Eileen says she's hurt her leg.

And all the time fat Winnie sits,
Stiff and smiling by the wall.
She sees the dancers in the hall
And pulls their flesh to little bits.

When Winnie takes me to her mind,
She holds me closest of them all.
She smiles to me across the floor
With opaque eyes and dropping jaw.

I am what she has come to find
And will remember evermore.

1947

Derbyshire

Tortoise-county, patterned by walls,
Hard grey limestone litters its fields,
Binding the land in giant parcels,
Grey-green, grey-brown.

Sheep county, cleft and scarred,
Sounding with water and with rain,
Stalking from cliff to cliff
In a dark cloak and dark grey hat.

The quiet of the uplands
Is as reassuring as the neat walls,
Deeply knotted as the pale tough grass,
Stern as the abandoned air.

Lips tasting of stone,
Rainflare in eyes,
I walk over the faded fields
Through villages like clenched fists,
Until at night, the breeze and stars,
The huge curved hills asleep like sheep,
Soles of my feet sounding on the arrogant rock,
Gaunt under grass as bones through skin,
The curling breeze, the clustered stars,
Bring unshared, self-consuming, solitary pleasure.

1948

Winter's Blight

Frost grip you;
Dark winds lip you;

Bare they will strip you.

Cold break you;
Night cries wake you;
Bright sky will take you.

Fog cloak you;
Sharp rain soak you;
Winter's blight croak you.

1949

I offered life as a skull
And death as an opening bud.
The transposition of years
Moved freely through calyx and bone.
Through the earth's dark hull
Ropes of congealing blood
Tautened and turned to stone.

And I offered again the life without breath,
The life that is death:
The enduring skull,
The ripening bud that rots within itself.

King Herod's daughter danced before me,
Asking for the head alone.

This poem was originally published in the school magazine, a few years after it was written. One day I had a letter from the BBC to say it had been selected for a broadcast about the most promising young poets of the year. A cheque came with the letter. Then the programme was repeated and a second cheque arrived. I was already at university and a few friends huddled round my transistor radio in the open air to hear the transmission. Probably my future career was determined by what I thought of as easy money. Naturally, it is the only poem for which I can now find no original manuscript or copy. So I hope the reconstruction from memory is correct. Personally I find it too influenced by Oscar Wilde.

1950

THE NAKED DANCE

The naked dance
With sword and lance

A mimic war.

Old-men come.
The rising drum
Makes old men run
Like youths once more.

Sounds of battle
Bid them rattle
Their old bones.

The naked dance.
Their fears enhance
Melodious groans-
The art of chance.

The title comes from a recording by Jelly Roll Morton.

1951

Cold numbs the evenings
And snips the leaves' stalks,
Rosy with decay, away they fall.

The birds fly and the humans huddle closer.
They draw the curtains, stuff the cracks,
Poke the coals or stoke the boiler,
Press switches, turn the gas-fire on.

Radios are playing through the walls
Of lodgers in bed-sitting rooms.
At ten, they rise to put a kettle on the ring
And slip another shilling in the meter.

Then they bring the cup, the coffee powder,
The sugar and the cardboard tub of milk,
And range them neatly on a pile of Penguins.

Bright shines the bedside light, enchanted pool.

Alone they sit, small islands of contentment,
Stirring the water through the heaving powder.
They sit and sip and sigh and idly turn another page,
Half-listening to something on the gramophone.

Soon shall the shirt pleasingly drip
Into night's honeycomb, one drop for every cell,
Dull beads of water in the dreaming brain,
That lightly drugged with all the season's pleasures
Awaits the dark dawn's simple stare.

1952

A moon like a penny for the eyes of the dead
Lets down her brilliant ropes, to hang
Above the clouds torn by the wind's whips.

The small trees are crumbling away
But still the hollow of their arms upholds
Two lovers turned to marble in its moon-striped cave.

And white as marble their arrested limbs
Whose meeting flesh mocks passion locked in stone.
Unable to recoil, they must embrace.

Eyes blankly staring, they maintain a pose
Taken before lust froze them utterly.

Only their active minds have spun,
To keep themselves aloft, this outer scene
Of darkness and the moon, cocoon of branches,
The low horizon and the pitiless wind.

1953

My Neighbour Fred

In the first world war
There were seven million missing.
They were missing.
What were they missing?
The swank occasions and the kissing.
Some were not missed, like my neighbour Fred.
The gas got him.
Forty nine years later the gas still has him.
He has choked for forty nine years
And his wife, lying beside his cold body,
Dreams all night of his rotted lungs
Like small dry sponges.

Wake up, Fred.
Fred, you're dead.

The slaughter and the roaring
That burst within the cannon's mouth
Into the brilliant mortifying circle
Gave absence without leave-taking.

In muddy trenches stirred the smells of May and Cordite.
All day the barbed wire sang.
Darkness brought the soldiers to their feet.
Bent double in their running, hump-backed hags
Tore, as commanded, through the paper hoops.
Briefly spreadeagled in their violent flight
The searchlights' fingers squashed them flat, like lice.
The groomed horses bent their knees.
Sideways they swayed, and fell.

For if you discount the suffering
(Please do)
And if you ignore the waste
(Why not?)
The fat eye still will turn upon its Judas stick
And, splitting, blast you.

We joy in the opium of poppy sellers.

In the first world war
There were seven million missing,
Quietly transformed
To trees and hedges, roots and weeds.

My next-door neighbour, Fred, was gassed in the war.

1954

Take me and cross me with nine tall stars

And windy smiles and trembling years.
And warp me and weft me with slow green seas
That tumble my curls like shadowed fears.

Tell of the sky that circles the grass
With salty murmurs, the casket of rain,

The sensitive scars that gape in the flesh
Like frivolous lips or slits in the past.
Now bright with oblivion's rust-eaten blade
Carve passion in gobbets and serve it on plates,
Warm, raw and stinking. The blear-eyed moon
Sinks below the reach of criticism
But mutters and mumbles the words all wrong
Because I gave my pennies to the monkey
And not the blindfold sailor.

Oh love! Oh love! Oh love!

How long I tried to twist the knife
Yet felt no pain. Look the mad dog
Square in the face and say to him,
BITE!
Bite off my nose, good dog.

On Byron's head the dust descends.
His nose was bitten not but he grew bald
And witty. The ages of the sun revolve.
In every hand they bring you gifts
Of oil for earache, charms for teeth,
Spells to press to your brow, chemical smoke,
Invisibility formulae, happy pills.
Pay no attention. Wave goodbye.
Drop in the sea, the slow green sea
And roll around like idiot eyes
Or like that da-da strain.

1955

OLD MAN BLUES

Everyone is running away and galloping
Down Ptolemaic avenues.
Old age has knifed its metal darkness through my eyes.
I have no voice to shout, "Help! Help!"
And being blind am invisible.
Weeping and crawling on the stone pavement,
I implore you not to rush past.
Please stay and comfort me, terrible presences.
I was always fond of positive action,
When I could see.
That is what hurts

Now.

This movement that drags me back.

You know I cannot run. I would like to rush.

You think I am obstinate

And that I scorn your new-fangled galloping.

But no. I would not refuse the gift,

To be blessed with a touch, a nauseous drop,

A stinging shot of that lovely power

I smell all over you.

Tell me.

What's the secret?

I am tired of this crawling and tired

Of what I am, a lamentable speck

In the avenues of giant statues

And winged messengers.